

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR BODY FAILS YOU

In my office, it is common for a person to tell me in a variety of ways that he is not happy with his body. The bottom line thought is that his body has “betrayed” him or “let him down.” The person is discontent and dissatisfied. He doesn’t like what has happened, how he feels, how his body works, or the lifestyle he has. He compares his present activities to those he could do prior to his bodily problem.

The truth of the matter is that a person’s body will fail, sometimes sooner than later, with death the ultimate bodily failure. This is a reality of living in our fallen world. Bodies fail in any number of ways. The failure may be in the context of an acute illness or one that lingers. By definition, the acute problem (such as pneumonia or appendicitis) is usually readily treated, and the body often is returned to a functional state that may not be much different than before the illness. However, sometimes the acute condition is an added burden to a body already heavy with problems. In that case resolution of the acute problem may not result in a return to normal or near function.

Also, the person is aging. Deterioration with age affects everything including our bodies (Ecclesiastes 12:1-8). Older bodies simply don’t function as well as younger ones. Bodily failure may be associated with cancer, some neurological condition, or joint problem such as rheumatoid arthritis and many other conditions. And failure of one’s body to function as he desires may occur when no obvious disease is found to readily explain it. Such is often the case for those who are experiencing so-called “chronic pain.”

Patients give any number of reasons why they are dissatisfied with their bodies. One understandable reason is that their bodies hurt and they are uncomfortable. Many say that they fear of death, suffering, or loss of function. Others may be concerned about the

reality of finances, including the cost of medical care and potential loss of income. Some people are concerned about time. Sometimes patients tell me that it takes time to care for their physical problem. They don't have the time -- or want to take the time -- to care for their body. Any number of reasons are given such as having too many people depending on them, too many responsibilities, or other priorities in life. Sometimes taking care of physical problems is not a top priority - the person simply wants "it" gone. These patients may express resentment for being dependent on others, even on their spouse.

Patients want me to "fix" them in some fashion. Sometimes they want me to fix the "unfixable." It is important for me to understand their definition of "fix" if I am to help them. Far too often, patients use the term "fix" to mean the removal of the body failure and its effect. Many times, a person's hope rests entirely on the expectation and desire to have a body that is "like it was," functioning like it used to, not hurting, or at least "better than it is now." In fact, often, they identify themselves based on a symptom (pain or fatigue or a condition) which controls their approach to life and going to the doctor.

Since breakdown of the body is an ever-present and potential reality, consider and answer the following questions:

1. How do you respond when your body is not working like you want it to?
2. What answers do you have when faced with the reality of having a body that you don't like, a lifestyle that you have but don't want, and the loss of the lifestyle that you used to have?
3. Where do you seek your answers?
4. How have your answers been helpful?

These important questions require answers that help bring about victory in the face of living daily with a failing body.

What are some answers that I hear regularly? Sometimes a person will offer no answers because he thinks he is beyond his resources and that is why he is seeking help. Sometimes the patient will give answers that he has heard from a friend or someone in the media (radio, television, book or the paper). Those types of answers usually include references to medications, surgery, needles, unproven remedies, or more effort on the part of the patient. Another patient may say that his hope lies in just “getting by,” “coping,” or “accepting” the circumstances he finds himself.

The answers described above are really not satisfying, final answers. This is because while specific diseases require specific treatments, sometimes proper treatment can't reverse the failing body. People do age, get sick, and eventually die despite the best efforts to care for them. In the final analysis, the desire for a changed body on this earth, while not wrong in itself, can lead to futility and further bondage. But not all is lost! There is hope. It is a wonderful thing that the God Who designed our bodies has provided answers. Those answers are in the Bible and can lead to living victoriously in a broken, perishable body.

What are those answers? Let's begin with Paul, a man who was familiar with a broken body (2 Corinthians 4:8-10; 6:4-10; 11:23-28; 12:1-10). In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul defends his apostleship and ministry in a most personal way. There were attacks on his body, his integrity, and his message. And he called his readers' attention to some of his bodily experiences. The verses above described the very difficult

circumstances that took their toll on Paul's body. His body was decaying; he makes this clear early in the letter. He summarizes his thinking in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18:

v.16: As a result we don't give up even though our outer person is decaying because our inner man is being renewed daily.

v.17: This temporary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory that is beyond all comparison,

v.18: since we aren't looking for the things that are seen but rather for the things that are unseen. The things that are seen are temporary but the things that are unseen are eternal.

In these three verses Paul gives God's answers for a failing body, and he explains why these answers are helpful. Paul was like many of my patients. He didn't have time to be interrupted. He had work he needed to do, and he had many responsibilities. He was the greatest missionary the world had ever known, and yet he found himself "tied down." People were depending on him even though he was suffering. He had pain and his body ached (6:4-10; 11:23-28; 12:7-10). He had anguish (4:8-10). Paul was under great pressures. But Paul didn't give up or give in. He was not overwhelmed, and his resources were not exhausted. Why not?

These verses teach that:

1. Paul had the correct facts (verse 16).
2. He had a correct standard by which to measure what was important (verse 17).
3. He had the right lens with which to see (verse 18).

Paul knew that his body was decaying – he could feel it. He acknowledged this fact by using a word (*diaphtheiro*) which means “to corrupt throughout, to decay wholly, or to perish.” Paul realized that God hadn't completely reversed the curse of sin on a believer's body in this present life. That reversal is reserved for heaven – for a time after Jesus' return. The realities of physical failure and bodily decay in this life are a given.

These are things that can be “seen” (verse 18). The “seen” is that which he was aware of by his senses what he and others could see and he could see and feel in his deteriorating body.

However, Paul also had the eyes of faith – saving faith because of his relationship with God in Christ. Therefore, in verse 18 he spoke of looking at (*skopeo*: “spying out” or “focusing on”) the “unseen” and inner-man renewal.¹ Paul compared what was happening in the heart – his inner man (the “unseen”) to the decaying of the body (his material or physical side: the “seen”). In this life, the believer’s body will continue to wither and decay, but his inner man is being renewed. God changes the inner man at salvation (the new birth). As a result, man is a new creation re-created in the likeness of God in terms of knowledge, holiness, and righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10).

God continues His re-creative process by renewing the inner man daily. One of God’s instruments is the person’s failing body. One mark of a renewed inner man is the changed focus of the believer from the “seen” to the “unseen.” He, like Paul, acknowledges God’s purpose for things and circumstances that he would rather not have. Tough times, including failing bodies, are tools intended by God to be used by the believer to become more like Christ. I refer patients to the oyster. An oyster uses irritations to make a pearl. The believer is to function as a Christian oyster: using the unpleasantness of a failing body to develop more of in Christ-likeness. Therefore, the believer will develop the fruit of the Spirit **in** the context of his failing body rather than **out** of or in spite of it (Galatians 5:22-23).

¹ The inner man refers to a person’s “heart” that which is known completely to God, incompletely to himself, and not at all to others.

Paul had the correct emphasis and priorities in life. He knew that a change in his inner man (and the fruit produced by that change) was incomparably unique and superior to relief from physical problems. The things that could be “seen” (they were “sensed”) were only physical, and they would not last indefinitely. His physical body was temporary; its end was in sight. The things that were “seen” weighed little on Paul’s measuring scale (verse 17). He was able to think this way because he evaluated things correctly. He measured the “seen” (bodily failure) against the “unseen” (inner-person renewal and a future with God in heaven).

Paul determined that glory must be defined God’s way. Glory was not to be found in bodily relief. It could come only through inner-man renewal for only through such renewal could he look forward to being in the presence of God forever.

Glory weighed much more than physical problems and relief from them when he used God’s balance beam. What sustained Paul was not a desire for a new body (even though he looked forward to receiving his resurrected, glorified body). Rather, he was sustained by the “unseen” which he “saw” and understood only with the eyes of faith (2 Corinthians 5:7: we walk not by sight but faith). Paul did not let his physical limitations discourage him because he was excited by what was happening to him in the inner man. The physical problems were not a hindrance to growth. Rather they were the context and springboard for him to grow. The changes that were taking place in his inner man were a foretaste of heaven as they pointed to eternal realities.

In leading up to verses 16-18, he began chapter 4 by declaring that he knew how to handle the various pressures of life (4:1-15). What was his secret -- God’s superior answer -- for handling difficult circumstances? It was gratitude (1 Thessalonians 5:18). In

verse one of chapter 4, Paul wrote: “Therefore since we have this service to perform as the result of God’s mercy, we don’t give up.” The word translated “give up” was also used in verse 16. (It means “to be faint hearted, fearful and pull back, lose courage, to be cowardly”). Paul was no coward. He was intensely grateful for three things:

1. God was merciful and demonstrated His mercy by saving him.
2. God entrusted to him a task to do - a ministry.
3. God continually enabled him to accomplish that task through His grace.

The greatest, ongoing joy and contentment in Paul’s life was the renewal of his inner man. Salvation refers to God’s initial work in the inner man. But Paul was just as excited and grateful that God’s Spirit was continuing to do His daily work of inward, spiritual renewal in him. And Paul knew the Spirit used own efforts to grow Paul (Philippians 2:12-13). Paul was forever indebted to God, and he carried on his God given-tasks out of gratitude but also a reverent awe and respect of and for his God. .

Later in this epistle, we read that Paul had a clear vision of what life was all about. One would think that the removal of his aches and pains would have enabled Paul to do a better job. But that is not the way God viewed it as Paul makes clear in 12:7-10. In those verses, Paul wrote that God wanted to prevent sin (pride) in Paul’s life and God accomplished this by afflicting him physically (verse 7). Paul prayed, asking for relief, but God’s answer was “no” (verses 8-9).

To many, God’s initial answer is startling enough. God’s explanation of His answer is even more startling: “My grace is sufficient for you.” God says, in essence, that it was good for Paul to be in a situation where his own resources were insufficient for relief or removal from it. Paul was compelled to rely on God and His more-than-

sufficient grace and power (Proverbs 3:5-8; 2 Corinthians 1:9). Moreover, Paul's endurance and daily effort were to be a living demonstration of God's power in him (See my book: *Biblical Endurance: What is it and How It Looks in the Believer's Life*). That is profound!

What is perhaps more startling (if that is possible!) is Paul's response. He understood and accepted God's "no" (2 Corinthians 12:10). We have already seen that Paul coveted the renewal of his inner man. We now see that he did not complain about God's method for producing it. Paul said that his bodily problems and experiences were something he rejoiced in. He did not enjoy the pain, but he understood and longed for the gain. The gain he sought was inner-man renewal. Paul made progress in becoming more like Christ when relief was beyond his power -- when he was weak. It was then that God's grace showed itself most clearly and worked in him most effectively.

Paul understood why he was on earth: to bring glory to God. He could do that best when he was weak. Paul could not remove his physical problems. Nor could he avoid the insults, the persecutions, and the difficulties. Of course, God could have removed all of them. Instead, He provided something far superior: grace. And God made Paul's life a testimony to the greatness of His grace (1 Timothy 1:12-16).

For someone living in this world with a failing body, life can become drudgery, a "bummer," a black hole, and bondage. He may desire to escape. He may speak of being "beyond his resources." He might even petition God for relief as Paul did. But that person must come to understand that God has him right where He wants him. This is the position in which God had Paul. And Paul did not respond as a self-pleaser but rather as a God-pleaser (2 Corinthians 5:9-15). Paul's proper vertical orientation made all the difference.

Paul rejoiced in God and in His mercy and grace. Because of his thankfulness, Paul kept on going. He endured (used them as a Christian oyster) his discomforts and remained faithful. Why? Paul valued the spiritual growth that resulted.

Paul was an optimistic and hopeful person. He was eternally optimistic because:

1. He had his eyes fixed on the eternal (2 Corinthians 4:18).
2. He correctly measured things by that which was weightier (2 Corinthians 4:17).
3. He chose to act upon the truth that he knew (2 Corinthians 4:16).

He didn't give up. He immersed himself in service to Christ. He had a task to do, and knew he would complete it only as a testimony to God's grace. God had been merciful to him, and he demonstrated his joyful gratitude through his ministry to others.

So what do you do with your failing body? How can you apply these truths to your life? Like Paul:

- believe that God is doing something good for you right now in your own situation (4:1,16). Truly God is powerful and purposeful.
- focus on the "unseen." When you have that focus, you will understand that the things God has in store for you will help you grow in grace -- rightfully responded to.
- as a result, you will be excited and even eager to grow even especially if the circumstances are difficult. Therefore, these truths are worthy of your gratitude (2 Peter 3:18).

Being thankful for what God has done, is doing, and will do for you is both a privilege and a command (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Thankfulness breeds endurance (1 Thessalonians 1:3). Using his own physical problems and limitations, Paul clearly

teaches that hope is not lost in the presence of human weakness. God makes no mistakes. He is trustworthy, and His grace enables you to faithfully trust Him.

Putting together what has been said, let's consider how to help others to respond to unpleasant and uncomfortable circumstances in their lives. As we have seen in Scripture and as Paul demonstrated, the holy Spirit urges people to grow in the realm of the "unseen." Only then will a person be able to "use" what he doesn't like as God's tool for him to grow and change. The things that are "seen" are often things that we long to be rid of. They are evaluated only by our physical senses and understanding, and not through the eyes of saving faith. Jesus also taught what it meant to "see" (evaluate life) using the eyes of faith in John 4:31-34:

v.31: Meanwhile His disciples encouraged Him, "Rabbi, eat."

v.32: But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you don't know about."

v.33: So they said to one another, "Somebody hasn't brought Him something to eat, has he?"

v.34: My food is to do the will of the One Who sent me and to finish His work.

Jesus taught the disciples that there is satisfaction in this life that is not experienced by the physical senses (the "seen"). Jesus appreciated the satisfaction that comes from eating a nice meal. He said, however, that as good as that experience is, there is an incomparably superior one. Jesus pointed the disciples to the deep satisfaction that comes from doing God's work. We have seen that Paul was teaching Jesus' perspective on life; Paul called it "inner" renewal (2 Corinthians 4:16). Only believers can experience inner renewal, and only they can enjoy true contentment in life irrespective of changed body.

Paul was joyful and grateful for the relationship God established with him. Therefore he did not give up or give in to and in hard times (2 Corinthians 4:1,16).

Rather, he used them to develop the character of Christ in himself. In light of these things, what is the answer to the question: “What is better than having a body that functions like you want?” The answer is that it is far better to be in a relationship with Christ that gives you -- by the indwelling Holy Spirit -- the capacity, orientation, desire, and direction (from His Word) to honor and please God daily. Since the believer has such a relationship with Christ, he can be satisfied and content even when he doesn’t have the body he wants. This satisfaction far outweighs the satisfactions that a healthy body can provide (Psalm 73:25-26).

Elsewhere Paul taught God’s design for believers is to be holy and blameless (Ephesians 1:4). That plan becomes a fulfilled reality at a moment in the history of a person because the believer is “in Christ.”² What was decided in eternity becomes a personal reality. True freedom is found in being able to do what God designed one to do. Attempts to do otherwise will lead to bondage. Believers – those who have a personal relationship with Christ – are set free from the bondage of sin and the slavery that results from seeking physical relief apart from Christ (John 8:31-36).

People who expect God to eliminate the curse of sin on their bodies while on this earth will be disappointed and even disillusioned. This is because God has said that this transformation will occur only after the final resurrection. Moreover, if God did not reverse the curse of sin on Jesus’ body, why should you expect Him to treat you better than He did Jesus? Do you have a right to demand such treatment? These questions are bottom-line, heart-searching questions that should teach and challenge you.

² “In Christ” is a Pauline term that pictures God’s relationship with a believer through the finished work of Christ. Paul means that the believer now is in relationship to God not only as Judge and Creator but as Father as well. The believer has an intimate, vktal relationship with Jesus such that he can call God *Abba* – Father – and Jesus his brother.

Paul's life was also simplified as a result of his relationship with Christ. He was able to focus on God's truth rather than his own wisdom and abilities in handling problems especially the problem of a broken body. He knew that his broken body was short lived, a "brief" inconvenience, when he compared the trouble it gave him to eternity. Therefore, instead of trying to change his circumstances, he gratefully set his face toward his God-given ministry.

Finally, we should note that Paul said elsewhere that he had learned how to be content (Philippians 4:10-13). He wrote that epistle while in prison. Paul's contentment came from a relationship with and knowledge of the all-sufficient Christ. Moreover, Jesus demonstrated that there was only one way to live a satisfying and joyful life. That way, as we discussed earlier, is summarized in John 4:31-34. Pleasing His Father delighted both Him and His Father. Jesus was always able to please His Father regardless of the circumstances. Seeking to please his Father is the only way a believer can live a delightful, satisfying, and joyful life (Psalm 73:25-26).

So, how about you? Are you discontent and dissatisfied with the body you have? Jesus says teaches that there is a way to think, desire, and act that is incomparably superior to pursuing a consuming, life-dominating quest to have a "new," better, and healthy body. Like Jesus, Paul was willing to wait to receive glory and his new, resurrected body. In the meantime, he chose to go on pleasing God with the body he had. He understood that the very weaknesses he had sought to be removed were tools given by God for him to use to gain spiritual maturity by producing spiritual fruit. He learned and practiced thankfulness and earnest, joyful service to the Father. He continued to learn to

see the good in what the world calls “bad,” and his love for the Father motivated him to serve God even when it was hard (Hebrews 12:1-3).

Homework assignment

Believers: consider and respond to Paul's word in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. Please read and record your answers in the spaces below.

Question 1: How do you and have you responded to the fact that your body is wearing out?

Question 2: Which one is your focus: the wearing out of your body or inner man renewal?

Question 3: Give reasons for why you focus on the outer man or the inner man.

Question 4 (from verse 16): What is it that Paul knew?

Question 5 (from verse 17):

- a. How is it possible for Paul to write that what is going on in the outer man is but momentary and light?
- b. What is the glory that Paul refers to?

Question 6 (from verse 18):

- a. What are the things "seen" and "unseen" that Paul refers to in verses 18 and 16?
- b. How is it possible for Paul to focus on the "unseen"?
- c. If your body is failing, does this give hope? Why or why not?
- d. What do you need to do to apply these principles to your daily life?